By Kyusaku Yumeno
Art by Towoji Honojiro
MAIDEN'S BOOKSHELF
HELL IN A BOTTLE

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HELL IN A BOTTLE

Kyusaku Yumeno + Towoji Honojiro

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“Hell in a Bottle” first appeared in the magazine Ryoki in October of 1928

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KYUSAKU YUMENO

Born in Fukuoka Prefecture in 1889. After dropping out of Keio University and drifting through various occupations, Yumeno published The Spirit Drum at the age of 37. His notable works include the novels Dogra Magra and Girl Hell.

Illustrations: TOWOJI HONOJIRO

Active as a freelance illustrator since 2015 working in character design, illustration, manga, and more. Honojiro is the also the author of Shiroshirojiro.

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Oceanic Research Institute
_____, 19__

Dear Sir,
We hope this letter finds you prosperous and well. In response to your request to advise all villagers to report found beer bottles sealed with red wax in connection to tidal current research, we would like to inform you that recently three beer bottles sealed with resin were discovered on the southern shore of this island, as you will find under separate cover in the form of a small package. The aforementioned items were discovered in locations half a mile to over a mile apart, buried in sand or trapped in cracks among rocks. They appear to have drifted here quite some time ago. We regret to inform you that the bottles contained no trace of any official postcard similar to the type you had mentioned, but only scraps of what resembled pages from a notebook. Thus we were unable to identify the time and date they drifted ashore, as requested. However, as they may serve some purpose for your investigation, we have taken the liberty to deliver the three bottles, sealed in the condition they were found, at our expense. We trust that you will receive them safely, and we are honored to be of service to you.

Yours very respectfully,
Village Office of _____ Island

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Dear Father, Mother, and all those who have come to save us,

At long last, a ship has finally come to our rescue on this remote island.

The large ship with twin stacks lowered two boats onto the raging waves. Mixed in with the onlookers on board the ship are the forms of our dear Father and Mother for whom we have longed night and day. And, oh! They are waving white handkerchiefs at us.

Father and Mother must have come to our rescue after reading the letter in the first beer bottle we threw into the ocean.

White smoke billowed out of the vessel, and the sound of the whistle was loud and clear, seemingly proclaiming, “We’re here to save you!” The sound startled the birds and insects on this little island and sent them flying off faraway into the sea.

Yet to us, the sound was more fearful than the trumpets of the Last Judgment. It was as though heaven and earth split into two, the gleam of the eyes of God and the fire of hell flashing before our eyes.

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Oh, my hands are trembling, my heart choked with anxiety … I can barely write. My vision is blurred with tears.

The two of us will climb up the cliff that directly faces the ship and, holding each other tight in plain view of Father, Mother, and the sailors who have come to save us, we will plunge straight into the depths of the pool to die. The sharks there will no doubt tear us up in an instant. And the people in the boat will spot the beer bottle with this letter inside and retrieve it.

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To those of you who have come all the way from your faraway home to save us, we are so very sorry for what we are going to do. Please, we beg you to forgive us. Have mercy on us for our tragic fate, which compels us to die just as our joyful return to the human world—to the bosoms of our loving Father and Mother—arrives.
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We cannot atone for our sins without being punished, body and soul, as retribution for the grave and terrible trespasses the two of us committed on this remote island.

Do forgive us for not confessing any further. We were mad and worthy only to be food for sharks …

Oh, Farewell!

From the piteous two
Forsaken by God and man

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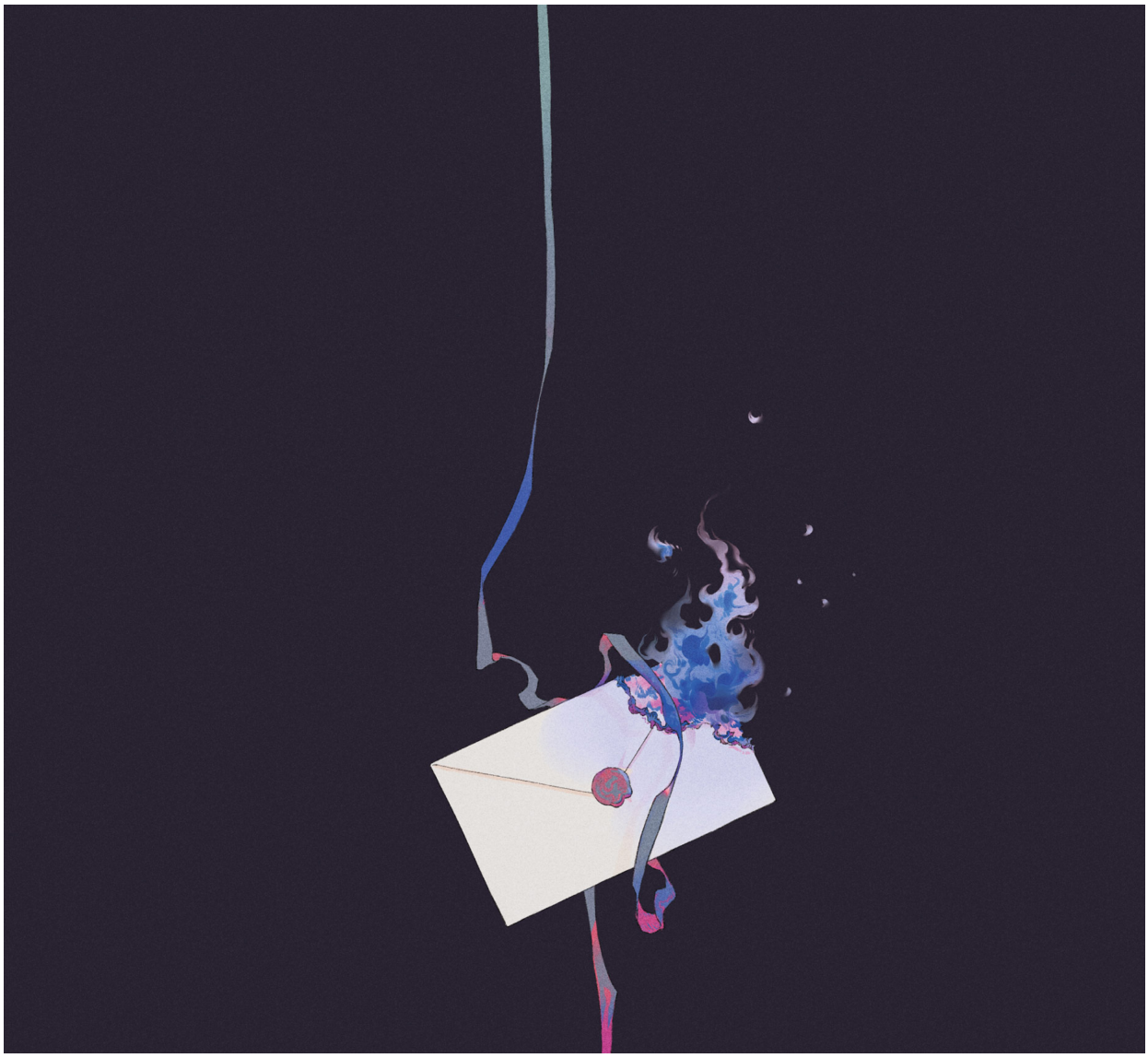

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Oh, inscrutable and all-seeing God.

Shall no other way besides death deliver us from this predicament?

I cannot count the times I have climbed up this steep cliff we called “God’s Footrest” all alone to peer into the bottomless pool below where two or three sharks always swim in playful rounds. Oh, how many times have I thought of throwing myself down there! Yet every time these thoughts rose in me, poor Ayako came to my mind, and, heaving a soul-wrenching sigh, I would climb back down the craggy rocks. I know for certain that if I were to die, Ayako will throw herself in after me.

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How many years has it been since Ayako and I drifted to this remote little island, after being tossed about by the raging waves with the nurse and her husband, the captain of the boat, and the sailors? Here, the summer is endless, with neither Christmas nor the New Year to mark time, but I sense that ten years must have passed.

All we had with us at that time were a pencil, a knife, a notebook, a magnifying glass, three beer bottles filled with water, and a small Bible.

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Yet we were happy.

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On this lush and green island, except for the occasional appearance of large ants, not a single bird, beast, or insect came to trouble us. At the time, I was eleven, and Ayako had just turned seven. There was an overflowing abundance of food for us. We found ourselves among mynas, parrots, birds of paradise that we had only seen in picture books, as well as fantastical butterflies of which we had neither seen nor heard. All year round, delicious coconuts, pineapples, bananas, gorgeous flora in bright red and purple, fragrant herbs and grasses, birds' eggs big and small were everywhere to be found. A stick was all we needed to catch as many birds and fish as we wanted.

After we had gathered sufficient food, we arranged some dried grass on driftwood and used the magnifying glass to light a fire. Then we cooked and ate.

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In time, we discovered a pure, clear spring that appeared during low tide between the cape and the crags on the east side of the island, so we built a little hut using the wreckage of the boat on the beach and paved it with soft dried grass. That was where Ayako and I slept. Right next to the hut, on the side of the crag, we bored a square-like cavity with old nails from the boat and made that into a storage space. Our outer and inner clothing ended up torn and tattered by the rain, wind, and the edges of the rocks, so we would go about naked like real barbarians. Nevertheless, morning and night, we never missed a day climbing up to God's Footrest to read the Bible and pray for Father and Mother.

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The two of us wrote a letter to Father and Mother and inserted it carefully into a beer bottle, sealed it tight with resin, and after kissing it over and over again, we cast it into the ocean. The bottle was carried by the currents that circle the island all the way out to sea, never to return again.

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To create a marker for rescue, we erected a tall pole at the highest point of God's Footrest, and continued to replenish it with fresh green leaves to make it visible.

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Sometimes we bickered, as children always do, but always made peace immediately and played school or some such games. I always had Ayako play the pupil and used the Bible to teach her how to read and write. The two of us came to think of the Bible as God, Father, Mother, and Teacher all rolled into one and treasured it far more than the magnifying glass and the beer bottles, placing it on the topmost shelf in the cavity in the rock. We were truly happy and peaceful. This island was like heaven to us.

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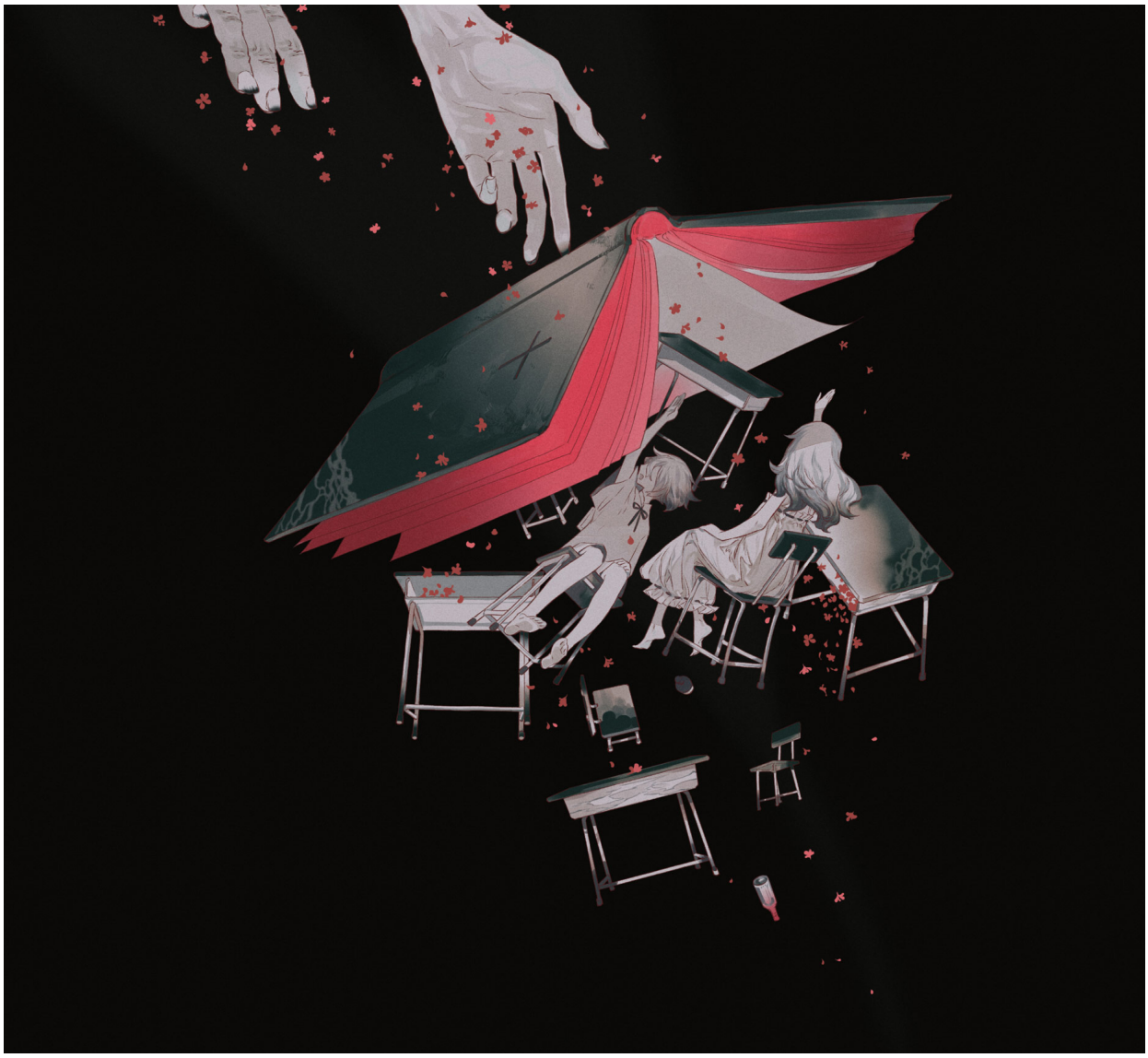

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Despite our blissful, idyllic life alone on this remote island, what made me think that the fearsome demon had stolen in upon us?

Yet I was dead certain that the demon had indeed crept in between us and taken us unawares.

When it began I could not tell, but as the days and months went by, it became obvious to my eyes that Ayako's body had acquired a voluptuous beauty that was nothing short of miraculous. Sometimes she sparkled like a flower sprite, and at other times she lured like a demon … when I saw her, I felt confused and stricken with a mysterious sadness.

"Brother …"

When she called me and flew toward me, her eyes twinkling with innocence, I felt a rousing deep within my heart, the likes of which I had never experienced before. Every time she called, my heart trembled with fear, as though condemned to wallow in the anxiety of total destruction.

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Yet in time, Ayako too began to behave differently. Like me, she had turned into a completely different person. She would gaze at me deeply with her lovely, teary eyes. She looked as though she were ashamed to touch my body, as if doing so would fill her with a great sadness.

We stopped fighting. Instead of quarreling, we both looked melancholic, and at times let out quiet sighs, born of the fact that our solitary existence on this remote island had become a source of unspeakable pain, pleasure, and intense loneliness for us. Not only that, but whenever we looked at each other, our eyes would fill with the growing darkness of a deathly gloom. Then all of a sudden we would be startled back to our senses as a thunderous roar—a warning from God or a cruel joke from the demon, I could not tell—ripped through our hearts. This happened many times a day.

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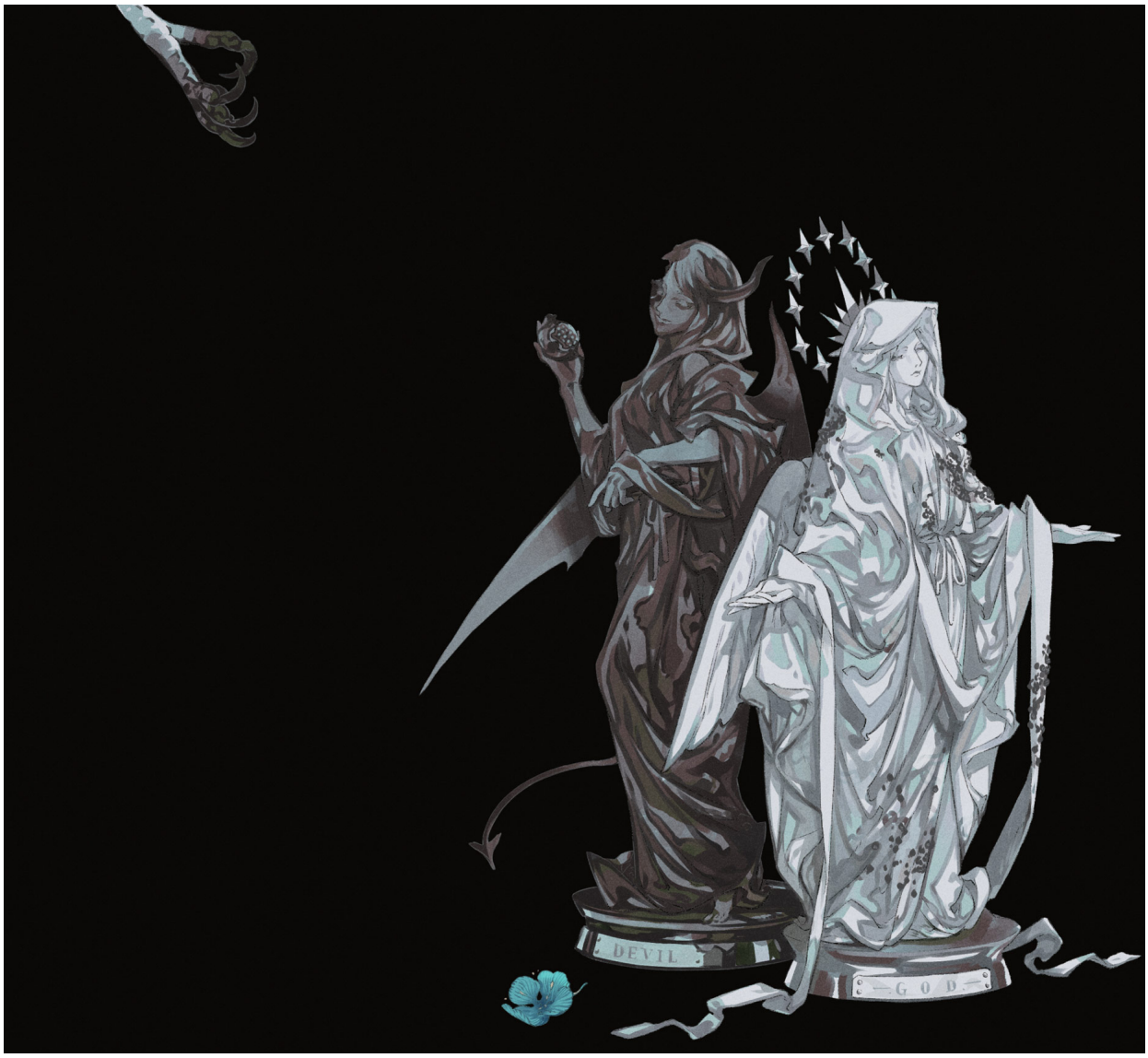

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Even though we knew precisely how each other felt, we dared not breathe a word to each other, fearing the punishment of God. What if the boat of salvation came AFTER we let it happen … we remained silent, troubled by the same thought deep in our hearts.

One quiet, clear afternoon, as we stretched out on the sandy beach after filling ourselves with cooked sea turtle eggs, gazing at the flowing white clouds faraway on the horizon, Ayako turned to me suddenly and said,

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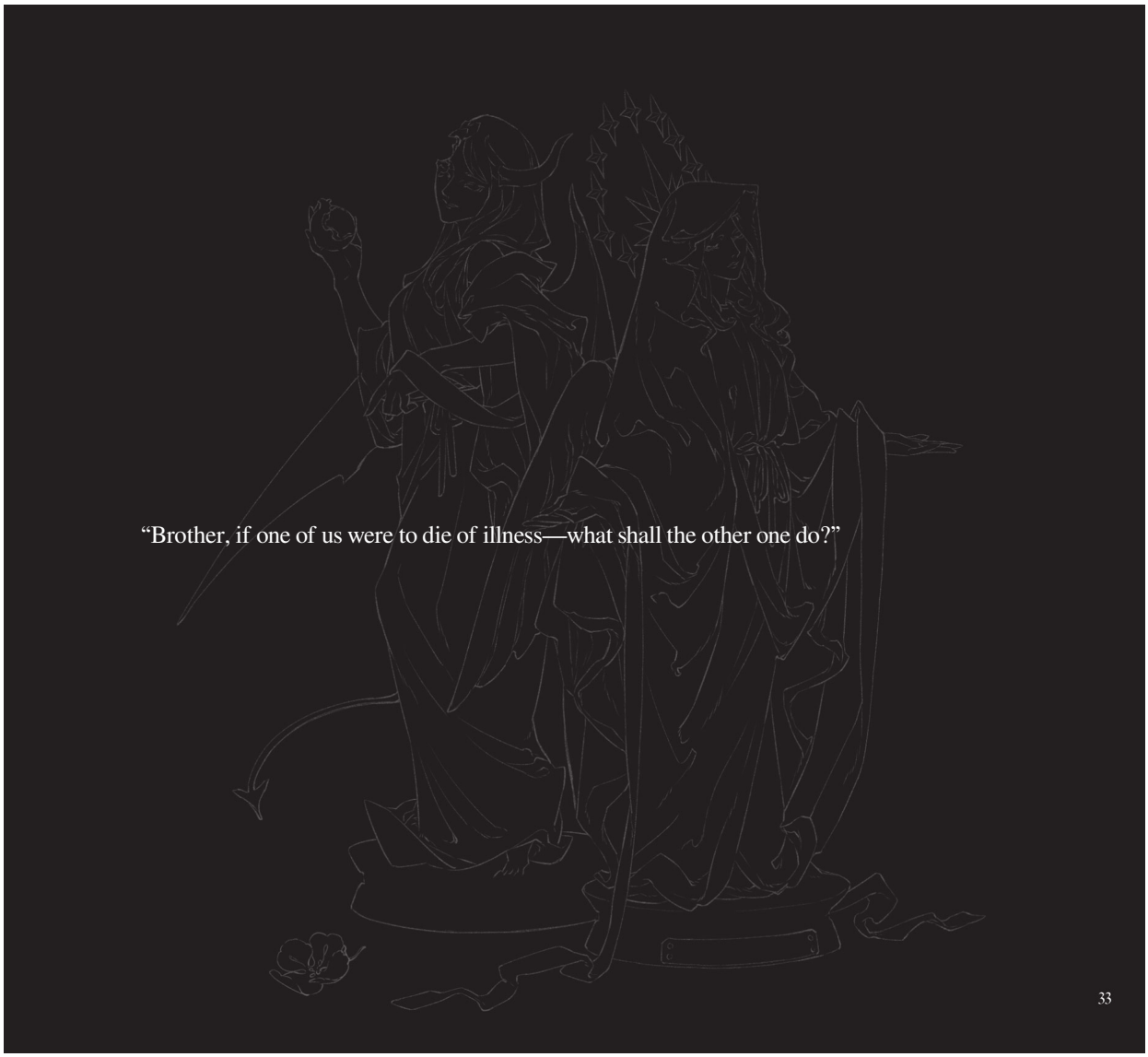

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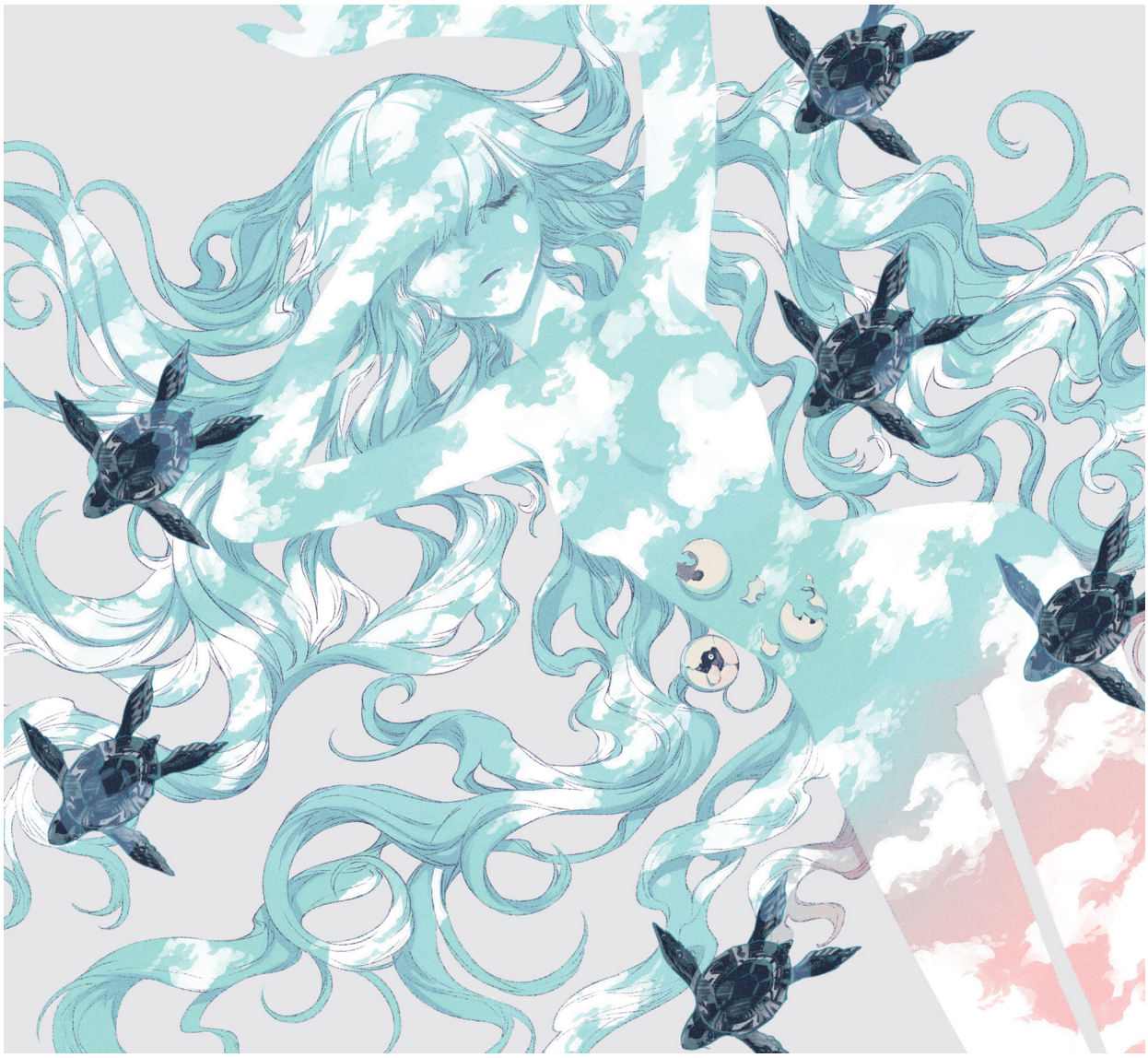

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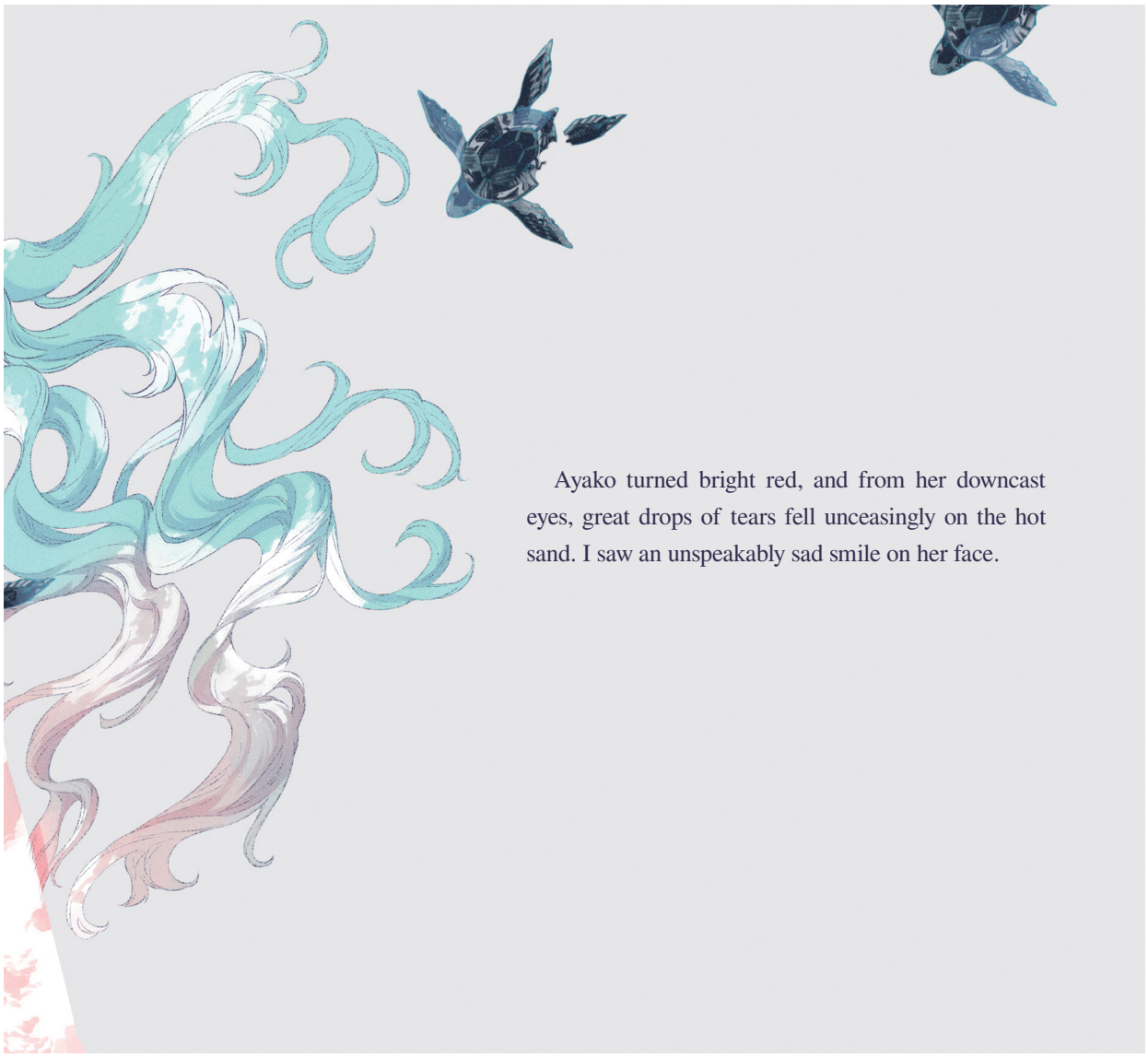

Ayako turned bright red, and from her downcast eyes, great drops of tears fell unceasingly on the hot sand. I saw an unspeakably sad smile on her face.

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I had no idea what my expression looked like at that moment. I simply could not breathe—my heart thumped as though it was about to burst, and I stood there without a word, stricken dumb. Quietly I left Ayako by herself and climbed up to God's Footrest, prostrating myself and tearing my hair.

"Oh, Father, who art in heaven! Ayako knows not what she does. That is why she said what she said to me. Please, I beg thee not to punish that virgin. Forever and ever, keep her pure and clean. Have mercy on me too …

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"And yet, my Lord, whatever shall I do! How can I deliver myself from that torture! The fact that I live is an immeasurable sin against Ayako. But if I die, I will cast her into even deeper sorrow and suffering. Oh, my Lord and my God, whatever shall I do …

"Oh merciful Lord …

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"Here I am, sand in my hair, prostrate on the cliff before thee. If my wish to die serves to execute thy divine will, I implore thee to strike out my life this very moment with a bolt of blazing lightning. Oh, inscrutable and all-seeing God! Hallowed be thy name! May a sign appear on earth for thy unworthy servant …"

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But the Lord gave not a single sign. White clouds drifted like strands of silk in the azure sky. Below the cliff, sharks swam playfully among the swirls of pure white waves in the cobalt water, flashing their tails and fins from time to time.

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Gazing deep into that clear and fathomless blue pool, my eyes began to trace endless circles, and my head began to spin. Faltering and stumbling, I nearly fell into the foamy waves that crashed against the rocks, but I pulled myself together and stopped at the edge of the cliff. Before I knew what I was doing, I sprang up to the highest point of the cliff, and, without a moment's hesitation, tore down the pole with the wilted coconut leaves that stood at the apex and hurled it all the way down to the bottomless pool.

"We're safe. Now even the rescue boat will just sail by without noticing."

I laughed aloud in great scorn and ran down the cliff at tremendous speed into our little shed like a lone wolf forsaken by its pack. I picked up the Bible opened to the Book of Songs, set it on top of the embers left from cooking turtle eggs, threw in a pile of dried grass and fanned up the blaze. Then, with all the strength and desperation that my voice could summon, I called Ayako's name as I dashed out to the beach in search of her …

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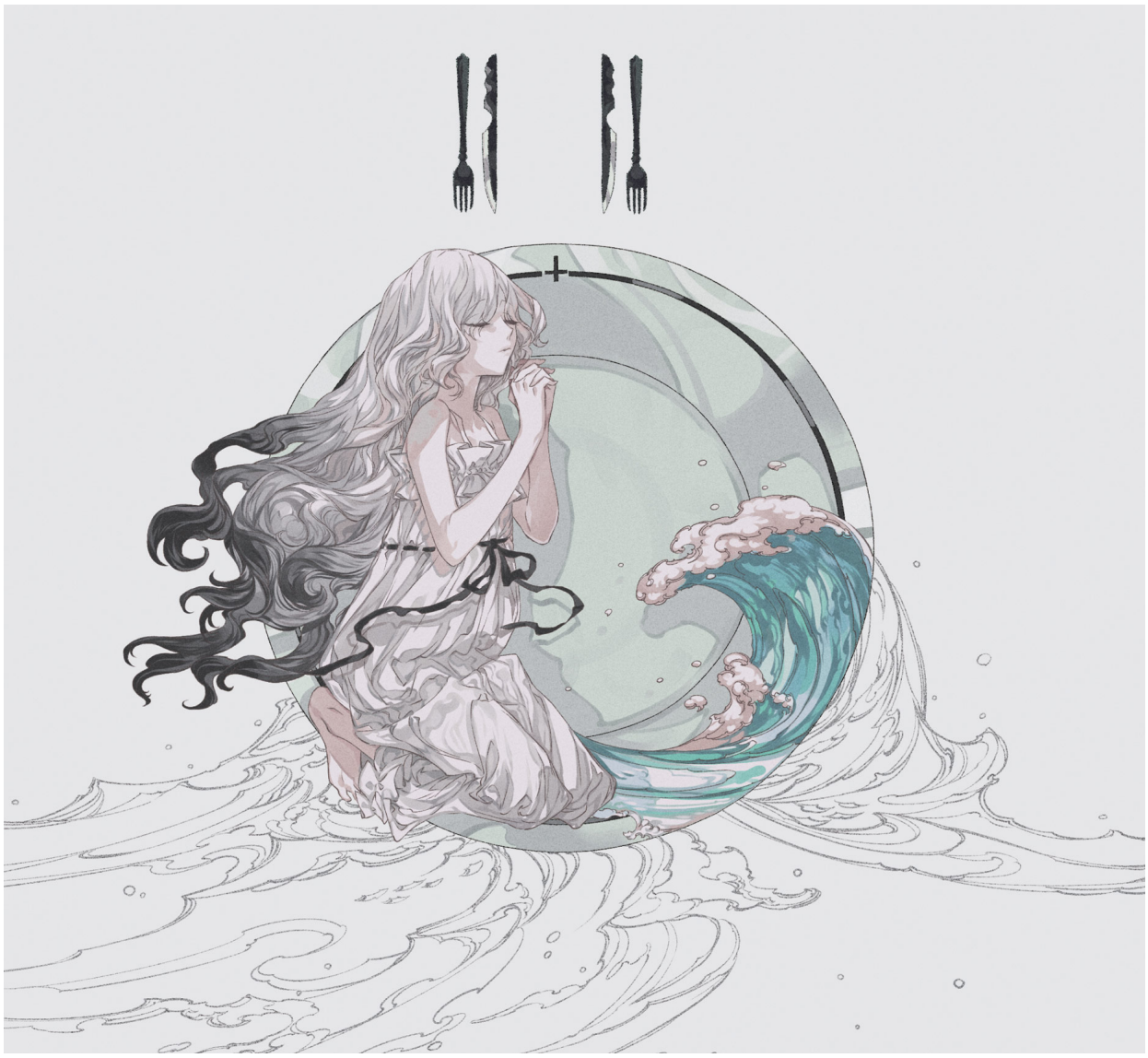

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When I caught sight of her, she was kneeling on a huge rock on a cape that jutted far out into the sea, her face lifted toward the sky as though she was praying.

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I stumbled two or three steps backward. The divine beauty of a virgin, swathed in the blood-red glow of the setting sun, kneeling on a purple rock among the raging waves …

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Entirely unaware of the rising tides that brought seaweed drifting to her knees, she prayed undistracted as golden waves washed up to her … oh, the nobility of that form, the dazzling beauty of it all …

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My body stiffened like a rock, and, for a moment, I stared vacantly without a thought. But all of a sudden, Ayako's intention became clear to me, and I jumped up in a flash. Running like a madman, I slid down the rock covered with seashells, sustaining numerous cuts, and climbed up to the rock on the cape. Ayako was flailing, crying and screaming like a crazed woman as I carried her tightly in my arms down the cape, our bodies covered with blood. It took a tremendous effort to return to where the little shed was.

Yet our little shed no longer existed. Along with the Bible and dried grass, it had turned into white smoke and disappeared far beyond into the blue sky.

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And then, the two of us—our bodies and souls—were cast out into the murky depths of darkness, left to wail and regret our lot day and night. Not only were we incapable of holding each other tight to comfort and encourage ourselves, and to pray and mourn for our loss, we could not even lie down together to sleep.

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That must have been the punishment for having burnt the Bible.

At night, the light of the stars, the sound of the waves, the humming of insects, the rustling of leaves, the sound of nuts falling from trees, each and everything whispered the words of the Bible and closed in on us with an ever tightening grip. Lying there paralyzed and sleepless with fear, we felt as though they had come to peer into our hearts writhing in the agony of separation. It was truly frightening.

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When daybreak came after a long, long night, a long, long day lay in waiting for us. The bright sun that shone on this island, the singing parrots, the dancing birds of paradise, the beetles, moths, coconuts, pineapples, the colors of flowers, the fragrance of grass, the sea, clouds, wind, rainbow, each and everything became entangled with Ayako's dazzling figure and suffocating fragrance, and twirled around me in a whirlpool of blinding brilliance until I thought it might attack and kill me. In the midst of all that, Ayako's sorrowful eyes, betraying the same torment, gazed at me steadily with the sadness of the Lord in one and the smile of the demon in the other.

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My pencil is near its end, so I can't go on writing for long.

Having encountered such torture and oppression, we still pray to seal our sincere, god-fearing hearts into this bottle and toss it into the sea.

Before we yield to the temptation of the demon …

At least while our bodies are still pure …

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Dear God … As we endure this great suffering, our flesh becomes richer and suppler by the day, and without succumbing to even a single illness, we continue to enjoy good health and beauty, surrounded and nourished by the clear air, water, abundant food, and the beautiful, delightful flowers and birds on this island …

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Oh, what horrible suffering! This island of bliss is now nothing less than hell.

My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me …

Why can't you simply destroy the two of us …

Taro

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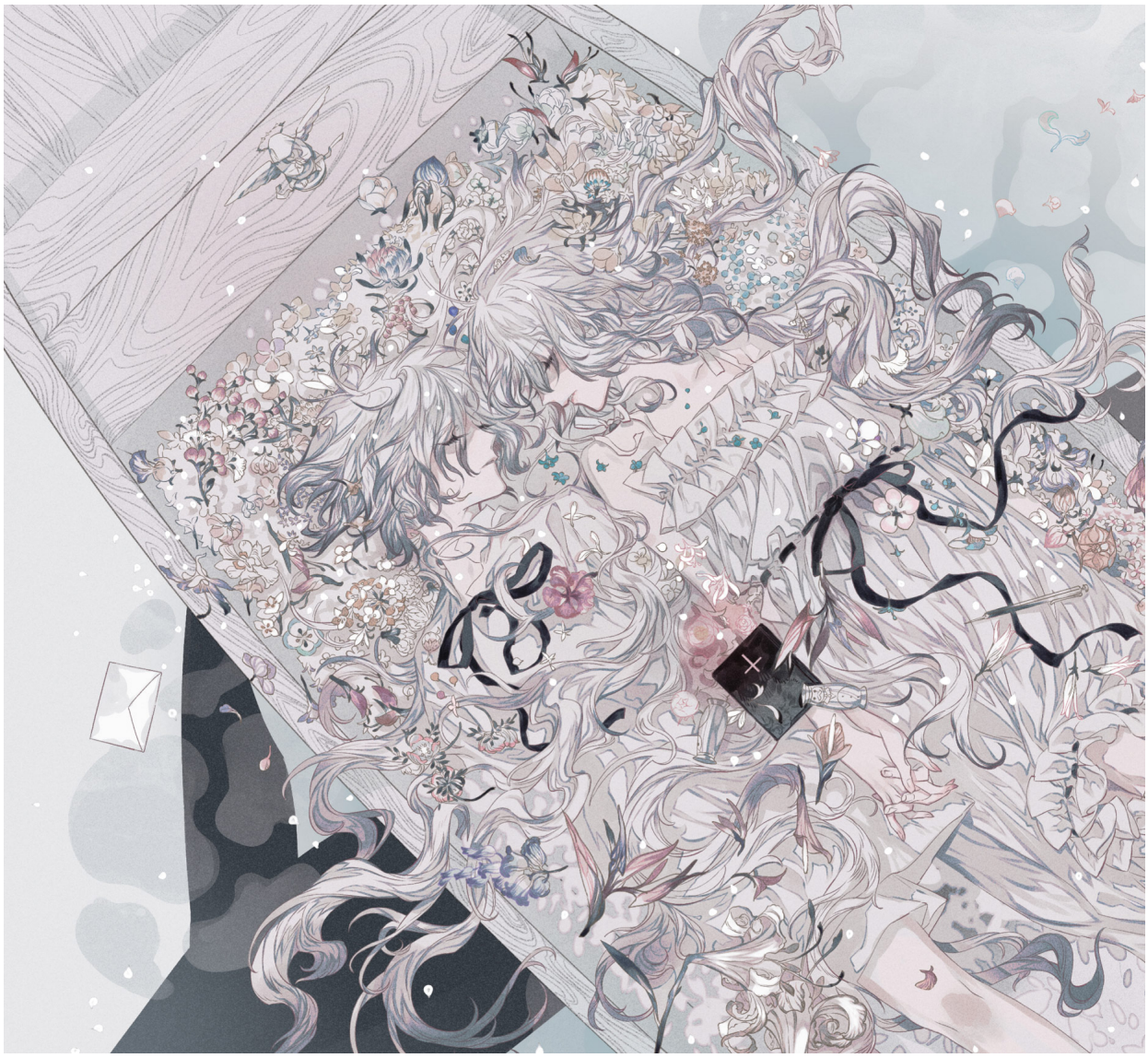

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Father, Mother. The two of us are good and getting along on this island. Please come to rescue us right away.

Ichikawa Taro

ichikawa ayako

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This book may include language that could be seen as offensive or discriminatory from today's standpoint, but in the interest of preserving the historical import of the work, we have included it in its original form.

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Hell in a Bottle

A VERTICAL Book

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Two young siblings left to survive on a deserted island, waiting for the rescue that may never come. They find joy in the wonders of their own personal Eden—until "the demon" shakes their faith and leads them down the path of temptation...

Told through a series of letters sealed in bottles and thrown out to sea, Kyusaku Yumeno's classic is just as harrowing and immediate today as when it was first published in 1928.

Kyusaku Yumeno (1889-1936) was one of the great Japanese authors of the bizarre, and a pioneer of both non-standard detective stories and proto-science fiction. His work is avant-garde, gothic, and often surreal, as evidenced in masterworks like *The Spirit Drum*, *Dogra Magra*, and *Hell in a Bottle*, presented here.

The **Maiden's Bookshelf** series combines classic short stories of the early 20th century with gorgeous original artwork to create collectible editions for a contemporary audience.

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